

# Civic Life in America:

## KEY FINDINGS ON THE CIVIC HEALTH OF THE NATION

### FACT SHEET

SEPTEMBER 2011

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, signed by President Obama in April 2009, authorized the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship to produce the Civic Health Assessment (known as Civic Life in America), an annual report detailing the many ways people get involved in communities across the country and work to make a difference. Data for the U.S., regions, state, and city (metropolitan area) level were collected mostly through the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. With this rich set of data, leaders and residents are able to identify opportunities to increase and sustain diverse and new types of engagement and build tools and resources to meet community needs. Today our nation continues to face a number of daunting challenges, including economic recovery, under-performing schools, and unexpected needs arising out of disasters. It is precisely because of the magnitude and multitude of these and other complex challenges that we must reconfigure the way we think and talk about engaging Americans in addressing them. This fact sheet provides an overview of key national findings. Additional statistics and analysis, as well as tools and resources to help communities stimulate greater civic engagement, can be found online at <http://www.serve.gov/civic>.



### DEFINING CIVIC LIFE

The term “civic life,” which can be used interchangeably with “civic engagement,” can describe a diverse set of activities. Civic engagement generally includes activities that build on the collective resources, skills, expertise, and knowledge of citizens to improve the quality of life in communities.<sup>1</sup> While many varieties of civic participation could be classified as civic engagement, this fact sheet focuses on activities that fall into five main categories: service, social connectedness, participating in groups, connecting to information and events, and political action.

### FINDINGS

*See the table on page-4 for a full list of national results.*

**Between 2008 and 2010, a majority of Americans were civically active in a rich variety of ways.**

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly abridged version of the definition used by the IUPUI Task Force on Civic Engagement, available at <http://schoe.coe.uga.edu/benchmarking/bei.html>.

With nearly nine in ten American households sitting down to dinner together frequently, more than half discussing politics at least several times a month, and a third actively participating in groups or organizations, civic life in America remained dynamic.

A majority of Americans were active in many of the activities that comprise three of the five civic engagement categories measured in the survey: political action, connecting to information/current events, and social connectedness. Additionally, more than a third participated in at least one group, while more than a quarter volunteered with an organization.

- Between 2008 and 2010, on average, over 70 percent of Americans discussed politics at least once a month and over a third (34.8%) did so frequently (a few times a week to basically every day.).
- Over two-thirds of Americans (68.6%) had dinner as a household basically every day and 88.7 percent did so frequently.
- Over half (53.8%) used the Internet to talk to family or friends frequently (a few times a week to basically every day) and 31.2 percent did so basically every day.
- Two thirds (67.9%) talked to neighbors at least a few times a month and 44.6 percent did so frequently.
- About one in three Americans (34.5%) were members of a group or organization, with 17.8 percent belonging to a religious institution or organization. People in the suburbs and rural areas were more likely to be part of a group than were those in urban areas (35.8% and 34.7% compared to 31.6%).
- Over a third (36.0%) did favors for neighbors at least a few times a month and 15.8 percent did so frequently.

### **Americans are civically engaged in all stages of their lives in pivotal ways.**

While overall civic engagement increases with age and is currently highest among Baby Boomers, Older Adults represent the second most civically engaged demographic group in America, with a higher percentage of people voting, donating, and participating in service or civic groups than any other demographic group.

*Older adults are highly active in political and community life in many ways.*

- Older Adults (age 65 and older) ranked either #1 or #2 among four generations across 13 of 19 civic engagement categories included in surveys between 2008 and 2010.
  - Older Adults ranked #1 in voting (58.9%), church or religious involvement (22.7%), service or civic group participation (10.4%), and doing favors for neighbors frequently (20.1%)
  - Older Adults ranked #2 in contacting public officials (12.7%), serving as a group officer or committee member (11.7%), and having dinner with members of their household frequently (90.5%).

*Baby Boomers lead the pack in many aspects of civic life.*

- Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) ranked either #1 or #2 among four generations across 17 of 19 civic engagement categories surveyed between 2008 and 2010.
  - Baby Boomers ranked #1 in discussing politics frequently (38.5%), volunteering (29.3%), and serving as an officer or committee member of a group (12.5%).
  - Baby Boomers ranked #2 in participating in school groups (16.3%), talking with neighbors frequently (45.9%), and participating in a sports or recreation group (9.7%).

*Generation X is heavily involved in family life, participating in school groups, sports, and recreation activities, and having dinner with household members more frequently than any other generation.*

- Generation X (born 1965-1981) ranked either #1 or #2 among four generations across 7 of 19 civic engagement categories surveyed between 2008 and 2010.
  - Generation X ranked #1 in the category of frequently eating dinner with household members (90.9%), participation in school groups (19.5%), and participation in sports or recreation groups (13.6%), and ranked #2 in discussing politics frequently (34.2%).

*Millennials continue to pioneer the digital age, talking via the Internet more frequently than any other generation.*

- Millennials (born 1982 or after) ranked #1 in talking via the Internet frequently (69.3%), and #3 in participation in sports or recreation groups (9.6%).

**Civic engagement is a reinforcing cycle — people who are involved in one area are more likely to be involved in others.**

Americans who participate in one area of civic engagement like volunteering, are more likely to get involved in other areas such as participating in groups, contacting public officials, or working with neighbors to solve community problems.

- Those who are more socially connected are also more likely to engage in service activities (volunteering, working with neighbors to fix community problems, and attending public meetings) and to belong to groups or associations regardless of the type of group.
- There is a strong association between service (including working with neighbors and attending public meetings, as well as volunteering) and political action and group involvement.

**The Internet continues to grow as an integral part of everyday civic life, with Millennials leading the way, but Generation X and Baby Boomers are close behind.**

In 2010, over two thirds of Americans talked with friends and family via the Internet. Over eight in ten Millennials used the Internet at least occasionally for this purpose, but Generation X and Baby Boomers were not far behind, with more than three quarters and two thirds using it for the same purpose respectively.

As more and more Americans dedicate more of their time to digital communications, community leaders will need to find new ways to fill community needs using online technology.

- In 2010, 32.5% of Americans talked with friends and family via the Internet basically every day, compared with 32.1% in 2009 and 28.8% in 2008.
- Of demographic groups, Millennials remained the most active online; 69.3% of which talked via the Internet frequently (a few times a week to basically every day), followed by Generation X (61.2%), Baby Boomers (51.3%), and Older Adults (29.5%).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Most of the statistics reported in *Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of the Nation* come from the Current Population Survey's (CPS) Civic Engagement Supplement, which has been conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics each November since 2008. Others come from the Voting Supplement to the CPS, administered in November in even-numbered years; the Volunteer Supplement to the CPS, administered every September since 2002; and the October 2007 Computer Use Supplement to the CPS. Most supplements have a response rate of about 100,000 respondents. Some voting data (election returns) also come from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections (<http://www.uselectionatlas.org/>). For more information, see [civic.serve.gov](http://civic.serve.gov).

## **CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

The Corporation for National and Community Service is a federal agency that engages more than five million Americans in service through Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and Learn and Serve America programs, and leads President Obama's national call to service initiative, United We Serve. For more information, visit [NationalService.gov](http://NationalService.gov).

## **NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP**

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) is non-partisan nonprofit working at the forefront of our nation's civic life. Through its events, research, and reports, NCoC expands our nation's contemporary understanding of what it means to be a citizen. More information can be found at [www.NCoC.net](http://www.NCoC.net).

## National Findings Table

Category and Indicator	National Results	Rounded # Participating
<b>Service</b>		
Volunteering with an Organization	26.3%	62,700,000
Main Organization - Civic, political, professional, or international	5.5%	3,500,000
Main Organization - Educational or youth service	26.7%	16,800,000
Main Organization - Hospital or other health	8.4%	5,200,000
Main Organization - Religious	35.0%	22,000,000
Main Organization - Social or community service	14.0%	8,700,000
Main Organization - Sport, hobby, cultural, or arts	3.4%	2,100,000
Main Organization - Other	7.0%	4,400,000
Working with Neighbors to Fix a Community Problem	8.4%	20,000,000
Attending Public Meeting	9.3%	29,000,000
Top Four Activities - Fundraise or sell items to raise money	26.5%	16,600,000
Top Four Activities - Collect, prepare, distribute, or serve food	23.5%	14,700,000
Top Four Activities - Engage in general labor or transportation	20.3%	12,700,000
Top Four Activities - Tutor or teach	18.5%	11,600,000
<b>Social Connectedness</b>		
Eating Dinner with Household Members - Frequently	88.7%	165,400,000
Eating Dinner with Household Members - Occasionally	7.4%	13,800,000
Eating Dinner with Household Members - Not at all	3.9%	7,200,000
Talking to Family/Friends via Internet - Frequently	53.8%	116,000,000
Talking to Family/Friends via Internet - Occasionally	14.1%	30,400,000
Talking to Family/Friends via Internet - Not at all	32.1%	69,100,000
Talking with Neighbors - Frequently	44.6%	97,600,000
Talking with Neighbors - Occasionally	36.6%	80,000,000
Talking with Neighbors - Not at all	18.8%	41,200,000
Exchanging Favors with Neighbors - Frequently	15.8%	34,500,000
Exchanging Favors with Neighbors - Occasionally	41.0%	89,400,000
Exchanging Favors with Neighbors - Not at all	43.1%	94,000,000
<b>Participating in a Group</b>		
School Group	14.9%	33,100,000
Service or Civic Association	6.8%	15,100,000
Sports or Recreation Association	10.1%	22,400,000
Church or Religious Association	17.8%	39,600,000
Other Group	5.5%	12,300,000
Participating in One or More Groups	34.5%	78,600,000
Served as Group Officer or Committee Member	9.7%	21,600,000
<b>Connecting to Information and Current Events</b>		
Discuss Politics - Frequently	34.8%	76,100,000
Discuss Politics - Occasionally	35.4%	77,300,000
Discuss Politics - Not at All	29.8%	65,100,000
<b>Political Action</b>		
Voting, 2010 Election	57.1%	131,400,000
Registered to Vote, 2010 Election	64.9%	146,300,000
Bought or Boycotted Product or Service because of Producers' Political Values	10.1%	22,600,000

Data for the electoral indicators (Voting and Registered to Vote) are calculated from the CPS Voting Supplement, November 2010. All other statistics in this fact sheet are calculated from pooled 2008-2010 CPS Supplements, either Volunteering (conducted in September) or Civic Engagement (conducted every November).